

Halton's Director of Education

School system is no Titanic: Lavender

Education in the 1980's will be facing many obstacles, with declining enrollments, increasing costs and differing opinions about the role of education in preparing people for the future.

By LOUI TAYLOR Herald staff writer

"Realistic optimism" is the phrase Halton director of education Em Lavender uses to describe his view of education in the 1980's.

His outlook is more hopeful than an analogy he once made comparing the next 10 years in education to the maiden voyage of the Titanic.

"When one talks about the analogy of the Titanic and education, it sounds like a pessimistic outlook," Mr. Lavender said. "I hope my attitude is realistic, tempered with optimism."

Mr. Lavender said that the Titanic was known by everybody to be the "safest ship ever built", with the latest technology, a qualified crew and the latest in design.

"The whole maiden voyage was surrounded by an air of confidence and optimism," Mr. Lavender said. Then the ship ran into wind and fog, and struck an iceberg.

"They knew the iceberg was there but they didn't turn in time, he said. "What compounded the tragedy was the fact that the radio system failed, and the Titanic wasn't in communication with the ships around it."

Mr. Lavender said education in Ontario has just started on its maiden voyage through the '80's, "and we know there's some fog and some wind and icebergs out there". Education in Ontario has been highly respected, and entered the '70s with a great deal of promise, he said. Education was supposed to be the solution to any problem.

TOWARDS ICEBERG

"Education is headed towards an iceberg, but we know it's there, and that's where my optimism comes in," Mr. Lavender said. "When we know it's there, we can turn in time."

"Education (like the Titanic) is headed towards an iceberg, but we can turn in time."

The disaster lying in wait for the ship is an iceberg labelled "finances", Mr. Lavender said, and the first symptom was Proposition 13 in California. That is ironic, he pointed out, because it carries the analogy of the Titanic even further. The ship closest to the Titanic the night she sank was the S.S. Californian, Mr. Lavender said.

The Californian education system has hit the iceberg with Proposition 13 and it's a blessing for Ontario, Mr. Lavender said, because educators in Ontario can watch from a distance and observe what happens.

"Before the '80's are out, something will happen in education and funding in Ontario," Mr. Lavender said. "If we go along in present circumstances, we'll face fiscal revolt."

Statistics indicate that over the next few years, Ontario's population, and Canada's as well, will be aging overall. There will be fewer children by number and by percentage, in the population, and the number of senior citizens will increase, Mr. Lavender said. There will be pressure on the government for social services for the elderly, and the cutbacks will have to be made somewhere to find the money.

"There has to be a change in the fund structure," Mr. Lavender said. "The burden on the homeowner over the next six or seven years can't increase at its present rate". He said it would take not just one change, but a group of changes, to turn education away from the iceberg.

REFORM TAXES

Reform of the tax structures is one of the first things that will have to be done, Mr. Lavender said.

"I don't know what they can do, but it will probably end up being a federal decision," he said.

The next step is a clarification of the role of the school, he said.

"In the '70s, schools expanded with the number of children they had, and also with what we as people said schools should do," Mr. Lavender said. "Many things were added, with a fair amount of justification."

One area which people aren't clear on in Ontario, and in Canada too, Mr. Lavender said, is which agency should be training carpenters, auto workers, auto mechanics, industrial workers and skilled laborers.

"I'm sure that if we were to visit a Manpower office this morning, we would find an ironic situation," he said. "We find a lot of little pieces of paper all over the walls with job vacancies for skilled people. And we'd find a line-up of young people, ready, able and willing to work, who don't want to be a drag on society, who want to contribute to society, but who don't have the skills for the work."

"Suppose we were parents of teenage children," he said. "As parents of teenagers, we agree, they should have skills

schools and community colleges to get too involved in the program, but that it needs some kind of co-ordinating policy and some liaison with private employers.

"We as parents will have to take a hard look at job prospects for our children," he said.

While the main problem facing education is fiscal, there are many side issues clouding the picture, Mr. Lavender

the schools have? What should we be teaching Ontario children about Quebec?"

"What impressed me about the past week, leaving aside the politics of it, with our country and Mr. Diefenbaker, was the whole experience reminded us we are a country, we have great men and we have an obligation to remember and respect those great men," Mr. Lavender said.

"If we go along in present circumstances, we'll face fiscal revolt."

One of the issues receiving the most widespread attention is declining enrollment. Halton has not yet been seriously affected by the problem, especially when compared to the situation in metro, where the board will lose 50,000 students, or the equivalent of the entire Halton system over the next few years, he said.

In Halton, the mix of people will change, and the population tends to be moving, Mr. Lavender said. The population is shifting from south of the Queen Elizabeth Way to north of the highway.

"We'll have plenty of pupil places, but not where the pupils are," he said.

Those kind of issues are significant, but if people tend to ignore the big issue and "fuss over the little one," we'll hit the big one," Mr. Lavender said.

One example of expanding expectations with regard to what schools should be providing is the argument that because schools sit empty from 5 o'clock in the morning, the schools should be thrown open to the public for community use, free of charge, Mr. Lavender said.

The argument that because the taxpayers have already paid for the use of the facilities, they should have the right to use them without charge, is a palatable one, but rather simplistic, Mr. Lavender said. "This board is open to community use of schools," he said. "But the question is, do the people of Ontario want their education tax dollars spent on textbooks, teachers and so on, or on Saturday morning gymnastics?"

OPENING SCHOOLS

People don't understand that opening a school outside school hours isn't simply a matter of turning a key, Mr. Lavender said. A caretaker must come in to look after school property and because the school caretakers are unionized, they must be paid overtime. People ask why the key can't be turned over to a trusted citizen, he said, but the high incidence of vandalism which occurs on school property after school hours would make for a heavy burden for the citizen responsible for the key.

"The public must recognize that for every dollar education spent on recreation, that's a dollar not spent on education," Mr. Lavender said. "Either that, or they must provide more dollars."

"What is the role of the school in inculcating in kids a sense of Canadian unity?" he asked. "What responsibility do

"There are people who say kids don't have any pride in their country," he continued.

"A close friend of mine was on a trip recently and he literally stumbled over Lester Pearson's grave. It was unkempt, and overgrown with weeds. If we are to instill in our kids a sense of great pride in our country, and in men like Mr. Pearson and Mr. Diefenbaker, we have to treat their graves with respect. While schools have a responsibility to instill respect in children, we as people have a responsibility to show respect too."

"We're a funny kind of people when it comes to that kind of thing," Mr. Lavender said. "We say the Americans are too emotional when it comes to the way they sentimentalize their past and watch so carefully over their historical monuments and so on, but how can we be proud of the unkempt grave of a Nobel Peace Prize winner?"

EDUCATION QUALITY

Charges by members of the public that the quality of education has deteriorated in the past thirty years or so are part of the wind which is surrounding the main issues in education, Mr. Lavender said. It's easy for educators to say people have been saying that for 30 years, so they don't need to worry about it, he said.

"I think literacy and some element of competence in mathematics is essential," he said. "As we find out more about the exceptional child, the child with learning disabilities, there will be pressure for more and better special education programs."

The Halton board of education is involved in an experimental program to find new methods of discovering learning disabilities as early as possible, Mr. Lavender said. Halton has the Halton Early Identification Study, which aims to identify learning disabilities before the child enters kindergarten.

"Educators are trying to find better ways of determining young children's strengths and weaknesses and matching the teaching program to those," Mr. Lavender said.

The issue of discipline has always been a problem for educators, and it is arising again as the media give publicity to discipline problems in city schools, Mr. Lavender said.

"The issue is easy to label and hard to describe," he said. "Discipline is a quality which is ranking higher and higher in polls showing what parents think should be part of the function of a school."



Em Lavender, director of education for the Halton board, has been working in the field of education since 1950. From his perspective as a former teacher and principal, and his work in

administration, he talked to The Herald about the future of education in the 1980's and the problems the "ship" of education will be facing. (Herald photo)

"Hard as it seems to believe now, but when I was a principal the length of a boy's hair was directly related to learning weaknesses," Mr. Lavender said. "But that's not what parents are talking about when they talk about discipline. They're talking about the behavior of students with their peers and in the company of adults."

"It's a quandary. Parents want tight control over the students while they're in school, but they also want the schools to teach the students self-discipline, and that can't be done unless you give the student the freedom to exercise that self-discipline," he said.

Board-employee contract negotiations have changed greatly since the passing of Bill 100, which gave teachers the right to negotiate anything related to their working conditions.

The fact that teachers have the right to strike has changed the environment of negotiations, Mr. Lavender said.

"Boards and teachers got into much different negotiations, requiring a much higher level of skill," he said.

"The right to strike is deeply held in the labor movement, and it's hard for some parents, and teachers who look on their job as a profession, to accept the right to strike," Mr. Lavender said. "They feel that education is an essential service. What the prolonged teacher strikes show is that a grade 13 student can be out of school for 38 days, with an additional time added at the end of the school year, can be given a diploma, can be accepted into a university, and can pass."

STUDENT DIPLOMA

"If education isn't an essential service, we'd better admit it and be less exalted about our own position," he said.

"I know I'm being incomplete by saying that, because I've talked to parents and students who have been involved in these lengthy strikes, and the students got their diploma, but they came out of the situation with a sour attitude, and that's much more serious," he added. "Nobody wins in a strike situation."

"Since Bill 100 was passed in 1975, negotiations in Halton have been reasonable and responsible," Mr. Lavender said. "We haven't come close to a strike."

Leaving Halton out of it, I can tell you the scenario, or the three-act play, for a teachers' strike," he said. "Act one, the teachers strike and the public tells the board, 'Don't give them a cent'. Act two, some days later, the public says, 'don't give them a cent, but get them back in school'. In act three, the public says, 'Get

them back'."

Mr. Lavender said he expects there will be attempts made to change Bill 100, but he said he doesn't think any attempts to remove the right to strike will be successful.

"I think there will be a move to re-examine the right to strike of the principals, because people say that they are management since they represent the board in the schools," Mr. Lavender said. "There's been a suggestion to take the principal out of the teachers federations, and possibly form an organization of their own."

One of the most pressing concerns of teachers now is the fear that declining enrollment will mean the loss of teachers' jobs, and one of the statistics bandied about in discussions is the pupil-teacher ratio. The Halton board of education agreed last year during negotiations to hire additional teachers for special education programs.

Mr. Lavender said trying to lower pupil-teacher ratio can be "unproductive and unwise."

LOWER RATIO

"If the pupil-teacher ratio in Halton were to be lowered one full point, it would mean hiring 50 to 60 new teachers," he said. "We have 76 schools, and the effect of less than one teacher per school wouldn't be felt. It would cost almost \$1 million and would provide almost no effect."

Mr. Lavender said that when discussing the role of education in preparing students for life, it is possible to talk either in generalities or specifics. He pointed out that the role of education is different for the exceptional child, be he exceptionally gifted, or mentally handicapped. The common denominator, however, is to give them a self-concept, to teach them "to be proud of what they are."

"I think it's a set of attitudes which education must develop, an attitude of relating to other people," Mr. Lavender said. "We have a precept that honesty is essential. Education has a responsibility to morality, but not total responsibility."

"There are people who say schools should have total responsibility for morality, especially when something goes wrong," he said. "When you enter those areas, however, the people say you're entering the field of the parent."

"We have to thank the Georgetown University Women's Club, for reminding us of Physical fitness and the importance of being fit," Mr. Lavender said. "Schools have the responsibility of instilling the attitude of personal responsibility for fitness."

CUTBACK SERVICES

Mr. Lavender said he sees a

multi-headed approach as being necessary to make the changes in the educational system which will be necessary for it to survive. There will be a cutback in services of some kind, with consolidation of courses in certain schools, mainly in the south half of the region, and there may be other changes as well.

It has been suggested, for example, he said, that schools should charge students for their textbooks. People think that this would instill in students a greater sense of responsibility towards property, as well as creating a large financial saving for boards of education, he said.

"The role of extra-curricular activities is a contentious one," Mr. Lavender said. "It's purely a North American tradition, but why do we do it? I know people say that morale in the classroom comes from team sports, but we will have to take a long, hard look at why we're spending that kind of money on peripheral activities."

Mr. Lavender said he sees many, many positive things about the educational system, particularly in Halton.

"I wouldn't want to leave the impression that we're going to hell in a basket," he said. "When I started in 1950 as a teacher, in secondary schools, out of 100 students in grade nine, you might have six or seven graduating from Grade 13, and fewer than that going on to university. We had a minority of the population in school."

ENJOYED IT

"I really, really enjoyed it," he said. "There had been eight school boards up there, and now there was one, and I was the representative of the board in the south, trying to pull it all

together. The relationship I had with the principals was terrific. I look back on it with nostalgia."

"It's a proud thing to be a teacher, to be an educator of children," Mr. Lavender said. "It always has been, it always will be. Turning a light on in a child's mind - I can't think of anything more commendable than that."

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"Discipline ranks high in polls showing what parents think schools should provide."

"Nowadays, we're educating more children of more people for longer periods of time," he said. "Thirty years ago, over half the kids in school now wouldn't have been there."

"It would be so easy to teach as we did in the '50's," Mr. Lavender continued. "I'd lay British history on you, and if you didn't like it, you'd leave school."

"The qualifications of teachers, and what we know about teaching and about kids, has improved greatly over the years," he said. "The quality of leadership has improved, as

together. The relationship I had with the principals was terrific. I look back on it with nostalgia."

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Declining enrollment, the financial crunch and changing views on the role of education may face educators, but in the

classroom, life continues much the same for students, who still have to worry about passing and failing. (Herald photo)